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ABSTRACT

A study examined the feasibility of marketing a national model of alternative special education teacher certification/licensure, the extent of program need, and the types of content and processes that such a program should have. A telephone survey of State Improvement Grant Directors or their equivalents in 14 states indicated that most states had already adopted procedures for alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers. The procedures could be developed within the context of a national model that addresses identified needs. Any potential program needs to consider regional differences in critical shortage areas. Inner city schools and rural schools have the greatest need. The cross-categorical 'generalist' group and the categorically based 'specialist' group of special education teachers demonstrated the most consistent demand. The most common alternative program delivery was some combination of school district and university partnership. The framework provided by the Council for Exceptional Children provides an acceptable starting point in the development of a national model. The processes for supporting alternative certification/licensure programs are equally important to the content and delivery of the knowledge base. Online delivery was considered the most promising way of implementing a national program. Lack of university support for such a model was the major barrier. State education agencies need to know more precisely the components of such a model before making a commitment. (TD)

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ALTERNATIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER CERTIFICATION PRACTICES

Critical shortages of special education teachers who are fully qualified for the positions they hold exist in all fifty states (Council for Exceptional Children, 2001). This typically results in teachers of arguably the most difficult to educate students being employed outside their primary field of teaching expertise, teaching on emergency authorizations, or pursuing temporary teacher eligibility status while pursuing approved programs of graduate study. The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education at the Council for Exceptional Children has systematically collected data on the recruitment and retention issues inherent in the special education teacher shortage phenomenon. The National Clearinghouse has identified that the magnitude of shortages is becoming more significant despite the efforts of most states to provide alternative routes to teacher certification in special education. The difficulties found in the lack of reciprocity between and among states on the common standards for special education teacher certification further contribute to these critical shortages and suggest the potential for a national solution to increasing the supply of qualified special educators to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This need has been documented on a national basis (Boe, Cook Bobbitt, & Terhanian, 1998) through data that demonstrate nearly 10% of all special education teachers are not fully qualified for their positions compared to 5.5% of teachers in general education fields.

The issues of quality personnel preparation and the capacity of traditional teacher preparation programs to meet the need for adequate numbers of special education teachers has been widely debated in the past decade. Sindelar & Marks (1993) found no difference between alternative special education teacher certification programs compared to traditional teacher preparation programs on teaching performance measures. A variety of models of special education teacher certification/licensure programs have been described in the professional literature that describe positive outcomes for such programs when weighed against teacher performance criteria (Edelen-Smith & Sileo, 1996; Gaynor & Little, 1997; Rosenberg & Rock, 1994).

Miller, Brownell, & Smith (1999) investigated the reasons why special education teacher stay in the special education assignment, transfer to another setting, or leave the special education teaching profession. Their results indicated that teachers left special education primarily due to insufficient certification, perceptions of high stress, and perceptions of poor school climate. The issue of retention inevitably has been traced to the level of preparedness and effective performance levels of beginning special educators (Maroney, 2000).

The Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children has acknowledged the significance of the alternative certification dilemma for teacher preparation institutions as the demand for qualified personnel outstrips the supply. Siders (2001) identified a double standard that confronts the traditional teacher preparation programs found in Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that operate under accreditation restrictions that suppress program innovation in teacher education. While traditional teacher preparation programs are being held to higher standards through federal Title II mandates that link performance of program graduates to success in the classroom, alternative certification programs have been largely unchecked. The solution to this issue is complex, and must be tied to rigorous entry criteria for applicants to alternative programs, availability of supporting processes and appropriate content geared to the expectations of receiving schools, and outcome measures that are performance-based and link preparation to the demonstration of what teachers know and can do.

The guiding purpose behind this investigation was to determine whether a market exists to provide alternative special education teacher certification across the country, and what types of services and/or products were required to address this need. To address this purpose, a determination of the extent of need for qualified special education teachers to meet the states' critical shortage areas for special education teachers was conducted. Specific attention was given to the types of existing alternative certification/licensure programs in special education across selected states, the content and processes identified to implement these programs, and whether a nationally developed model of alternative certification/licensure was viewed favorably as an option to meet identified needs.

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Method

Data Sources

A sample of respondents from fourteen selected states was identified to inform a survey of current practices and needs in the area of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers. A set of survey questions was developed based on a review of related literature on alternative certification practices that prepare special education teachers. These questions were reviewed and validated through consultation with the professional development staff at an established professional development organization with strong research-based products and services in the area of special education teacher education.

The sample was purposely selected to secure information from seven states that represented large population centers in primarily urban environments, and seven states that contained significantly rural, geographically diverse populations. The seven primarily urban states were New York, Florida, California, Texas, Michigan, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. The significantly rural states were Oregon, Arizona, Montana, Colorado, Nevada, Alabama, and Oklahoma. While urban centers and rural environments existed in each of the states surveyed, the balance of highly concentrated population centers and significantly rural settings provided a balanced perspective on national needs in the area of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers.

Design

The respondents in each state were identified by position title of State Improvement Grant (SIG) Director, or Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) Coordinator in states that did not have a state improvement grant in operation. The state improvement grant program is a federal initiative through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to promote collaborative partnerships and systems change in state professional development systems. Each state that does not administer a state improvement grant is required to implement a comprehensive system of personnel development plan with the same mission of promoting effective professional development systems. The respondents were identified as key informants based on their expert knowledge of personnel shortages in the area of special education teachers and their familiarity with alternative certification/licensure practices in special education teacher preparation. In some instances it was necessary to obtain follow-up information by contacting the State Director of Teacher Credentialing or the equivalent for additional data.

The intent of the telephone surveys was to gain insight into the feasibility of offering a national model of alternative special education teacher certification/licensure, obtain data on the extent of program need, and determine the types of content and processes that would be valuable in the delivery of such a program. The structured set of interview questions was developed to determine the nature of alternative special education teacher certification practices in each state. In addition, the standards that have been developed along with the process and content that address these standards was solicited from each respondent. Specific probes were used to determine the degree to which the selected states would be supportive of a national model and approach to alternative teacher certification/licensure in the area of special education, and the degree to which such a program would require individualized components prior to adoption.

Analysis Procedures

All responses to survey questions were tabulated and compared for each of the survey questions. Individual differences and unique aspects reported from the various respondents were also reported by state.

Results and Discussion

Do states currently offer alternative routes or processes to teacher certification/licensure for Special Education Teachers?

All but three of the survey states offer an approved program of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers. Colorado, Michigan, and Montana reported that an alternative program for special education teacher preparation was not available. Illinois reported that legislation was passed to create such a program through

the sponsorship of institutions of higher education, but none has pursued this program to date. Montana reported the operation of a collaborative special education endorsement project in cooperation with the state university teacher preparation institutions. Colorado indicated that alternative teacher certification/licensure exists for twenty different endorsement areas, but not special education. Michigan reported that alternative special education teacher preparation was being actively discussed by members of the State Improvement Grant team, and would be recommended to the legislature for future adoption.

The remaining ten states that were actively offering alternative certification/licensure programs to prepare special education teachers described a variety of approaches, including programs sponsored by local school districts, institutions of higher education, and the state education agency. New York, California, and Pennsylvania reported recently adopted legislation that was designed to provide additional options for alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers.

A variety of providers have been identified by these selected states to administer alternative special education teacher certification/licensure programs. Among the providers, an increasing number of local school districts and partnership arrangements between local school districts and institutions of higher education were found to be the most active organizations in the delivery of alternative certification/licensure of special educators. Most states pointed to regional shortages that have been identified. The most pressing shortages were demonstrated in rural, geographically remote areas of the state as well as the urban, inner city areas where teaching vacancies were difficult to fill.

What are the numbers and desired specializations of Special Education Teachers who are not fully qualified?

The collection of data that document the extent of shortage of special education teachers is difficult to access in most states. The actual number of special educators who are not fully qualified continues to rise while the attention to recruitment and retention initiatives receives increasing attention. Each state maintains a slightly different approach to documenting the extent and severity of teacher shortages in special education.

The area of greatest need that was identified across the targeted states was some variation of a special education generalist teacher. A variety of terms were expressed to identify this area of need including: Special Education Mild/Moderate Needs Teacher; Special Education Generalist; Cross-categorical Special Education Teacher; Special Education Resource Teacher; Varying Exceptionalities Teacher; and Special Education Resource Specialist. In states that continue to be categorically based in special education teacher specializations, the critical shortages of teachers of students with emotional disabilities was the greatest area of need, followed by teachers of students with learning disabilities. The concept of regional differences within states with respect to personnel shortages was a theme that was frequently mentioned by the respondents. The needs of inner city school districts in urban school districts may be very different from the needs of school districts in rural and isolated regions of a given state.

What are the expectations for content and process considerations in alternative certification/licensure programs for special education teachers?

Several respondents commented on the challenges that have developed in an era when the focus on higher standards for teacher preparation programs seems to contradict the exacerbating critical shortages of teachers in high demand areas such as special education. The concern for quality was expressed by virtually every state that mentioned national accreditation through the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) as a quality benchmark and desirable expectation for alternative certification/licensure approaches. Each respondent alluded to the complex political challenges involved with alternative teacher certification efforts and consistently pointed out the difficulties posed to institutions of higher education for participation in such initiatives. In the words of one State Improvement Grant Director: "How do you have an NCATE approved alternative certification program since our state is an NCATE state. Universities are concerned and school districts are very supportive of alternative certification."

Many respondents viewed the expansion of alternative teacher certification of special education teachers as inevitable. As another State Improvement Grant Director voiced this sentiment: "Those who were trained in the old school of teacher education had reservations about special education alternative teacher certification. The demand

for alternative certification has made this a necessity. Many alternatively certified special education teachers do an excellent job once they're out." Another respondent was even more adamant: "Alternative teacher certification is the wave of the future in special education. Local districts need some flexibility in attracting and retaining special education teachers. I expect tremendous resistance from universities."

All fourteen respondents rated the eight categories of knowledge and skills for beginning special education teachers that have been identified by the Council for Exceptional Children. The results provided little variance in the reported importance of each category. In general, the categories that garnered the most support were: assessment diagnosis and evaluation; instructional content and practice; planning and managing the teaching and learning environment; and managing student behavior and social interaction skills. This was not a statistically significant difference, but one that may have some practical significance for the identification of essential knowledge and skills for special education teachers.

The importance of performance-oriented programs for alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers was a prevailing theme provided by respondents on the issues of content and process. According to one State Improvement Grant Director: "Performance-based measures are essential, and the performance needs to be documented. A variety of support systems should be identified to monitor and coach the performance of program participants including mentorship, portfolio, observation, and apprenticeship."

Finally, most states reported that their existing special education teacher preparation programs did not supply the capacity to meet the demands for special education teachers across the state. In states that reported adequate capacity to meet the projected demand, a number of factors (e.g., regional differences, geographical preferences of program graduates, out-of-state recruitment, etc.) resulting in an identified shortage of qualified special education teachers. The large majority of states responding reported that their schools were importing potential teacher candidates from other states. One state reported exploring the possibility of recruiting qualified teachers internationally from the Philippines.

Would a nationally developed model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers be useful in addressing your state's critical shortage of special education teachers?

The context of the survey established the tone for responses to questions about the development of a national model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers. This preliminary statement reads as follows: "Sopris West Educational Services is considering the development of a national model of alternative certification/licensure of entry-level special education teachers. Prior to moving forward with this potential initiative, Sopris West Educational Services is conducting a needs assessment to determine the extent of need for such a program and make certain that the program would meet the needs of state education agencies."

The responses to this collection of questions were encouraging from the stand points of either supporting a national model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers, or expressing interest in exploring the possibilities. The ability to deliver a national model through online instructional approaches was seen as the major opportunity for success, along with the cultivation of appropriate partnerships to support the organization and delivery of content and supportive processes. The major potential barrier was identified as lack of university support and/or acceptance of such a model. The equivocal nature of many responses to the potential for a national model is presumed to be the product of lack of specificity in the concept of a national model of special education teacher certification/licensure through an alternative model. Clearly state education agencies would need to know more precisely the components of such a model to determine whether it fits the context and identified needs for alleviating special education personnel shortages before making a commitment.

Summary Recommendations

In reviewing the themes and responses to the questions posed regarding the need for a national model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers along with the context for operation in the selected states, a number of relevant recommendations were identified. These recommendations are offered as a summary in no priority order or ranking of relative importance:

(1) Most states have already adopted procedures for alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers. The procedures are under-utilized for most instances, and could be developed within the context of a national model that addresses identified state needs.

(2) The absolute numbers of special education teachers who are not fully qualified varies tremendously across the selected states. Any program that would be developed needs to consider the regional differences that exist in critical shortage areas. The urban inner city schools and rural or geographically remote schools provide the greatest areas of need.

(3) While differences were noted in the types of special education teachers in greatest demand across states, the two categories that demonstrated the most consistent demand were the cross-categorical 'generalist' group of special education teachers and the categorically based 'specialist' group of special education teachers for students with emotional disabilities.

(4) There were many models of special education alternative certification/licensure program delivery across the states, with some combination of local school district and university partnership being the most widely supported process.

(5) While many states have identified their own set of competencies and standards for beginning special education teachers, the framework provided by the Council for Exceptional Children's Common Core of Knowledge and Skills Essential for Beginning Special Education Teachers provides an acceptable starting point in the development of a national model.

(6) The processes for supporting, coaching, and supervising alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers are equally important to the content and delivery of the professional knowledge base.

(7) Online delivery of a national model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers was seen as a critically valuable component to meet identified needs.

(8) The complexities of special education teacher supply and demand issues are not easily addressed through any single strategy. The competing requirements of quality program standards espoused by accreditation agencies versus the convenience provided by alternative models must be balanced to ensure competent teachers for students with disabilities.

(9) Institutions of higher education that offer traditional teacher preparation programs in special education were widely referenced as potential barriers to implementation of new approaches to special education teacher certification/licensure or potential opportunities to enhance the effectiveness and partnerships of new initiatives. A university presence appears to be essential to the success of any national model of alternative special education teacher certification/licensure program.

(10) It is recommended that a framework be developed which outlines the major components of both content and process that would become the basis for a national model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers. This framework would allow states to react with greater precision to the appropriateness of such a model to the individual state context and potential for adoption.

An additional dimension to assessing the needs of selected states for a national model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers would be the collection of information from State Directors of Teacher Licensure/Credentialing. In many instances the offices of teacher certification/licensure was described as being separate from the state education agency. The administrators responsible for the total picture of educator licensing and certification may provide additional insights into the complexities of individual state systems and offer guidance in the development of a national model that meets the reciprocity requirements that are often cited as desirable in addressing critical shortages of special education teachers.

The interview process sparked considerable interest from the state education agency professionals who were selected to participate in this survey. Many respondents expressed an interest in receiving a copy of the study results. A final recommendation was offered that, when appropriate, the results of this study should be disseminated to state education agencies to stimulate further discussion, potential interest, and support for a national model of alternative certification/licensure of special education teachers. It was clear from the tenor of responses that the concept of alternate approaches to special education teacher preparation is a politically charged subject in many states. A wide range of tangible and potential opponents to this type of teacher preparation approach has been identified in each state. It would be advisable to obtain information on the views of the most likely critics of alternate routes to teacher preparation in selected venues.

> "The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right place, but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment." --Dorothy Nevill

> "If you are never scared or embarrassed or hurt, it means you never take any chances." --Julia Sorel

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